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7-29-2004

Tracking global air pollution

By Nancy Cicco

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PORTSMOUTH - Imagine checking the weather forecast and getting along with it a detailed report on what the regional air quality is expected to be for the next few days.

Then imagine using that same information to develop sound environmental policy with it.

Those are the primary goals of the International Consortium for Atmospheric Research on Transport and Transformation, the largest air-quality study now under way at the University of New Hampshire and sites around the world.

"What this all comes down to is having good science on which to base good policy," said New Hampshire Sen. Judd Gregg, who was instrumental in getting federal support for the project. "You get good science by getting good research."

The project's research scientists are studying the "evolution of pollution" as it tracks west to east across the country and into Europe, officials said on Monday, as they gathered at the Port of New Hampshire to mark the midway point of the study.

Hundreds of scientists and officials from six countries, government agencies and universities are participating in the study, which runs from July 1 to Aug. 15. Their work is "providing rigorous evidence of how air pollution travels great distances and how it transforms en route," according to UNH President Ann Weaver Hart.



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The project is led by UNH scientists, along with researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Hart opened a brief news conference about the project in the shadow of the R/V Ronald H. Brown, a 294-foot NOAA research ship that is one of dozens of research tools being used in the study.

As officials at the news conference spoke, researchers were busy at work on the ship. Some, such as Megan Northway of Aerodyne Research in Billerica, Mass., were measuring fine particles suspended in the air with an aerosol mass spectrometer, she said.

The scientists are using 12 aircraft, including a NOAA Lockheed WP-3D Orion and a NASA DC-8 Airborne Laboratory, three earth-orbiting satellites, and UNH's four atmospheric investigation, regional modeling, analysis and prediction (AIRMAP) observatories, located throughout the state to conduct the study.

On Monday, officials also announced the successful maiden voyage from Long Island to Maine of a "Smart Balloon" that measures ozone in the atmosphere.

Officials at the news conference thanked Gregg for his efforts in helping to get funding for the initiative. As the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, Gregg secured \$5.75 million for the New England portion of the study, known as the New England Air Quality Study, and \$9 million for efforts to improve air-quality forecasting, according to information provided by UNH.

Officials could not ascertain the total cost of the project across all the agencies involved by deadline.

The research will also be used to help NOAA and the Environmental Protection Agency compile daily air-quality forecasts for the public. That initiative is set to begin in New England this fall, according to retired Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher Jr., NOAA administrator and the undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere.

"This is talking about real research and putting it to real public use," he said after the event.

Through its participation in the project, NASA hopes to study the relationship between regional changes in the environment and changes on a global scale, according to Ghassem R. Asrar, associate administrator, for earth science at NASA.

"What we learn about planet Earth has direct applicability to what we learn about other planets," he said, noting NASA's quest to "answer the age-old questions: Where did we come from, where are we going, are we alone?"

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